

# Research Meets Policy: Writing for your audience

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This explainer document is the third in a four part series based on Research Meets Policy at SFU 2021 - a virtual summer institute hosted by the SFU Knowledge Mobilization Hub.

Writing for a policy audience is different from academic writing. In this explainer, we share key tips and strategies for writing for a policy audience. We include details on writing a policy brief, a format that is commonly used to communicate research to policy.

## Who are we writing for?

Policy audiences are usually considered to be decision-makers including government officials, politicians, and heads of organizations. The following table summarizes common considerations for policy audiences: who they are, what they need, and how they prefer their information is presented to them.

## Tips on writing for policy audiences

- Use an inverted structure, presenting findings first
- Lead with your best shot: the punchiest conclusions should rise to the top
- Emphasize your interpretation and analysis, not the methods
- Suggest potential actions and different scenarios
- Write in the active voice
- Keep it short
- Avoid technical language or jargon, and aim for an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level
- Use round numbers; convert odds ratios to whole numbers or percentages
- Never use regression co-efficients: describe the level of confidence instead
- For qualitative findings, include quotes to reinforce your points

Who they are	What they need	Prefer information that is
Short on time	Information in a politically expedient timeframe	Concise
Have limited or no domain knowledge	Key evidence around a topic – facts, research, expert opinion	Unambiguous in the implications of its findings
Juggling a range of issues, with varying levels of interest	Evidence for why they should be interested	Guidance, not orders, for possible actions
Motivated, in part, by self-preservation	Want to make informed and politically defensible decisions	Analysis backed by solid evidence
Sensitive to the needs of their constituents	Competing narratives on a topic	Realistic and/or feasible

## Tips for using tables, images, or graphs

- Limit the number of data points, trends, or rows/columns included
- Use clear, legible labels or headers
- Title of graphic should be non-technical and convey key findings
- Always include a caption describing the image

## What is a policy brief?

A policy brief is a concise (max. 2000 words), accessible document that summarizes an issue, presents policy options, and offers recommendations. It is aimed at individuals or organizations involved in formulating, implementing, or influencing policy.



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## Outline for writing a policy brief

There are many [templates](#) and recommended [structures](#) for policy briefs. Here are the typical elements:

**Title** – short and engaging

**Summary** – clearly state the problem and summarize main conclusions

**Background** – include relevant data to represent problem, summarize previous research, and logically lead to key messages

**Key Messages** – sub-headings convey message, new information is clearly identified, any graphs or tables are organized and easy to read, and evidence for main message is convincing

**Policy Implications** – make the research and policy connection clear, and clearly articulate the relevance of the issue ('so what')

**Recommendations** – aim to include specific actions; who is responsible for the action; and if there is need for further research

**Conclusions** – include the expected results of actions; end on a positive note

## Resources for writing

Readability tools: [SMOG](#), [Hemingway App](#)  
National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools: [SUPPORT tools for evidence informed policy making](#)

Policy Brief Examples:

Wellesley Institute (2017):

[Supportive housing for Ontario](#)

O'Neill & Wentworth (2021):

[Coastal management](#)